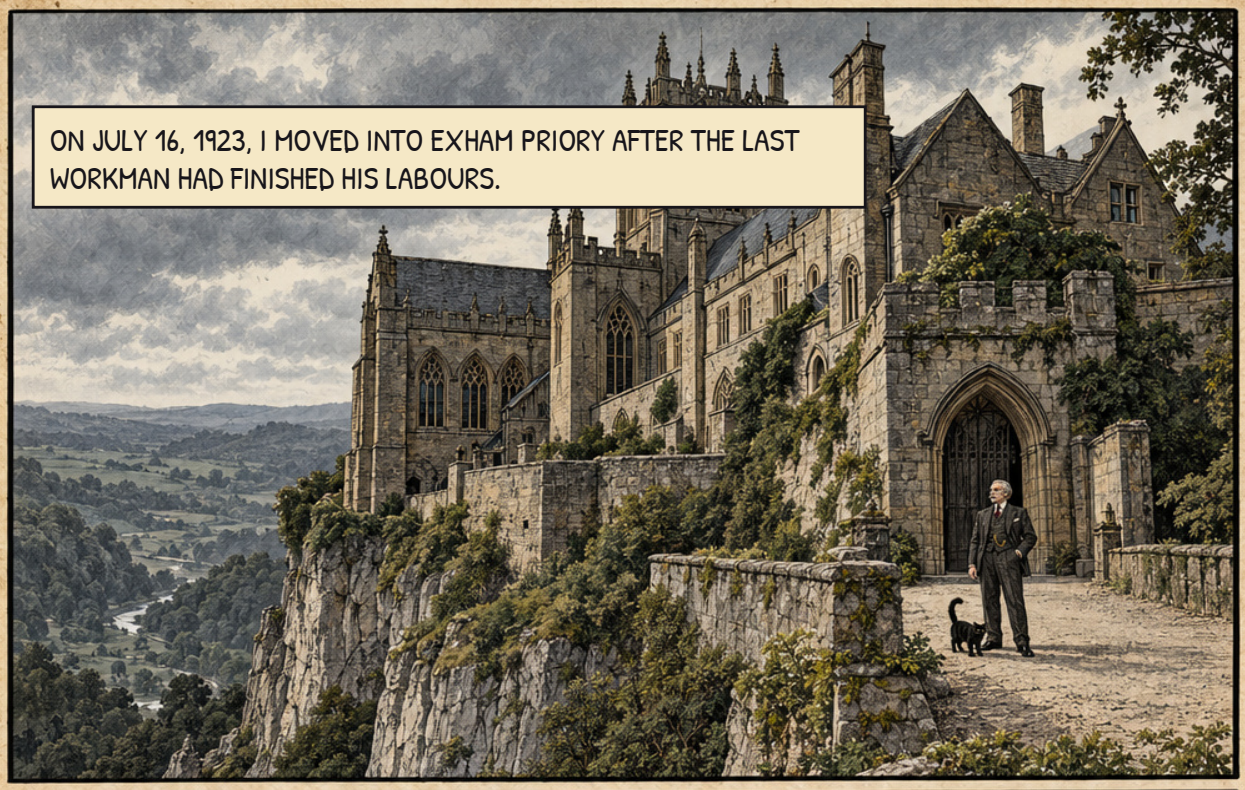
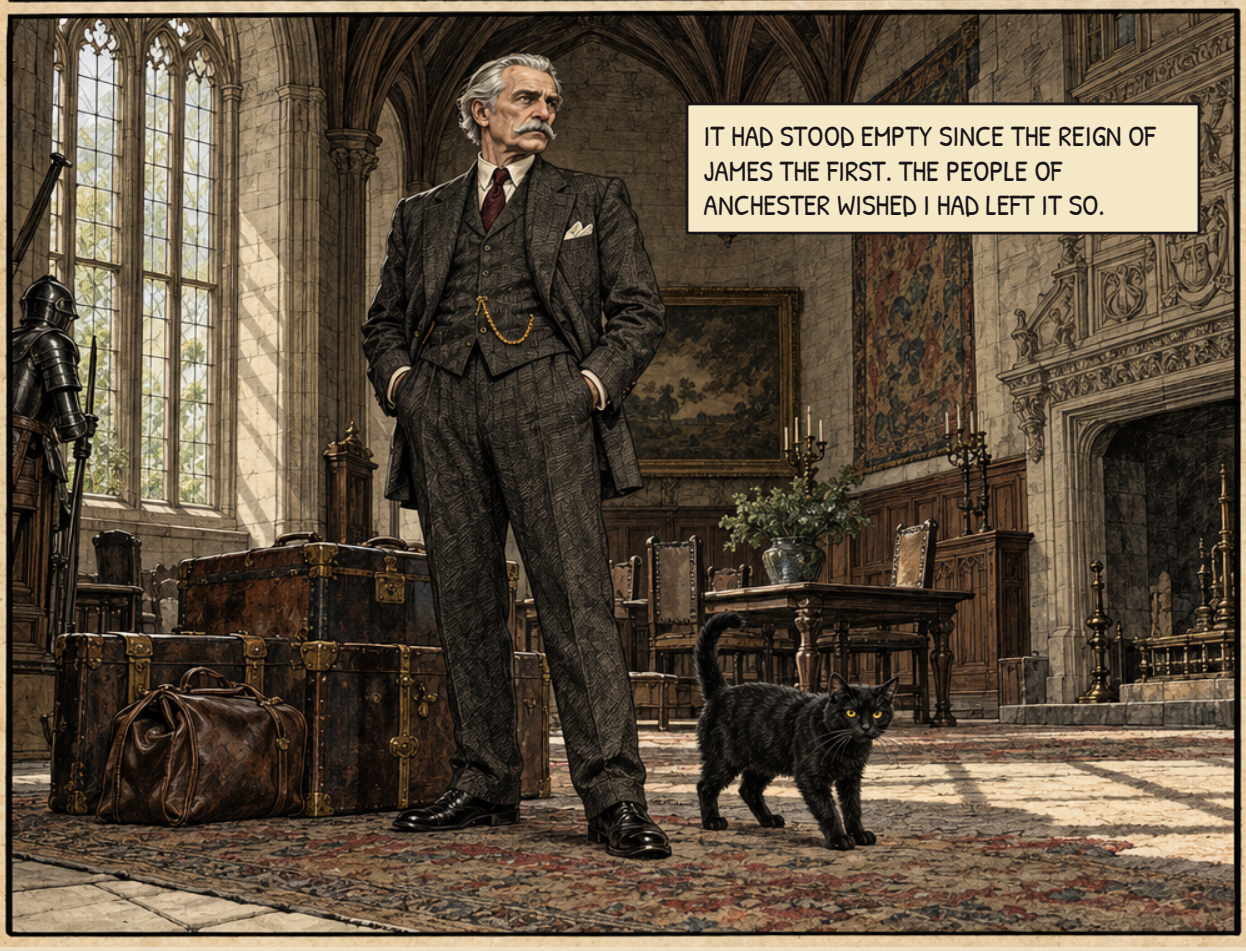
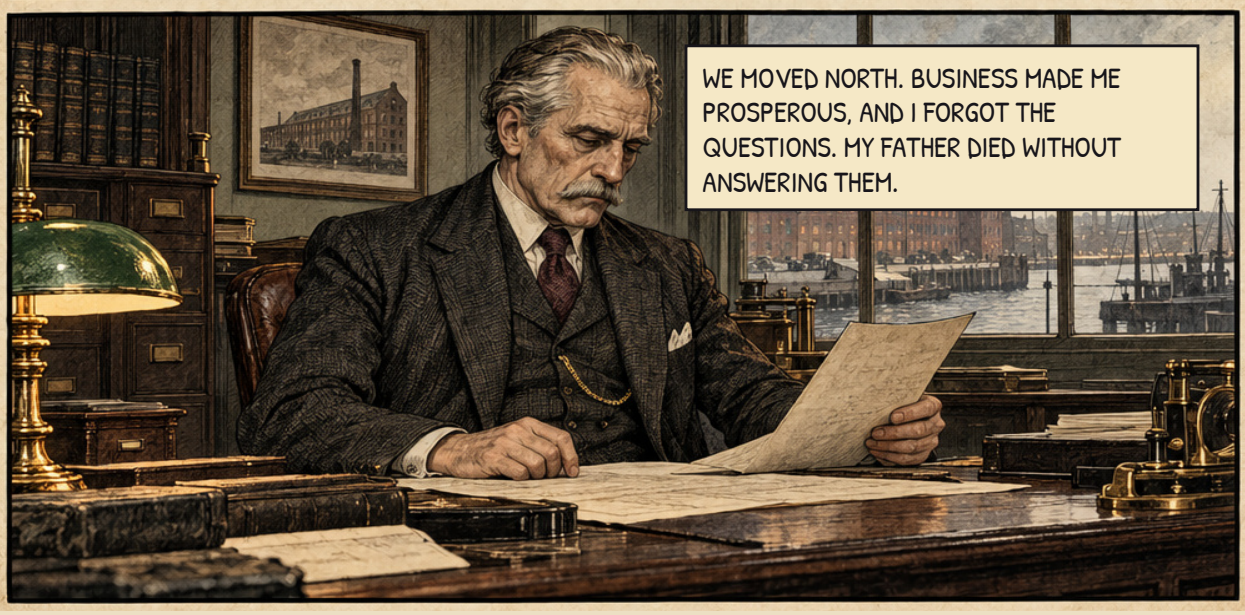
THE RATS IN THE WALLS





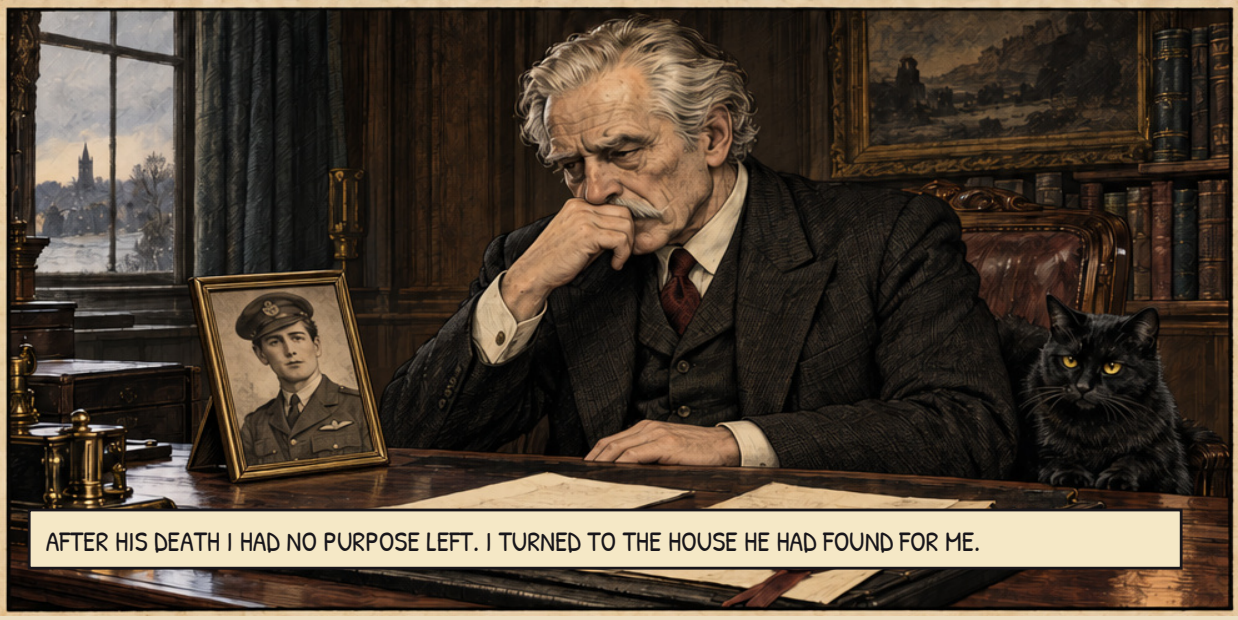

AT SEVEN, I WATCHED OUR VIRGINIA HOME BURN. MY GRANDFATHER DIED THERE.


WITH HIM WENT A SEALED PAPER, PASSED FROM FATHER TO SON. IT HELD THE HISTORY OUR FAMILY NEVER SPOKE OF.


WE MOVED NORTH. BUSINESS MADE ME PROSPEROUS, AND I FORGOT THE QUESTIONS. MY FATHER DIED WITHOUT ANSWERING THEM.

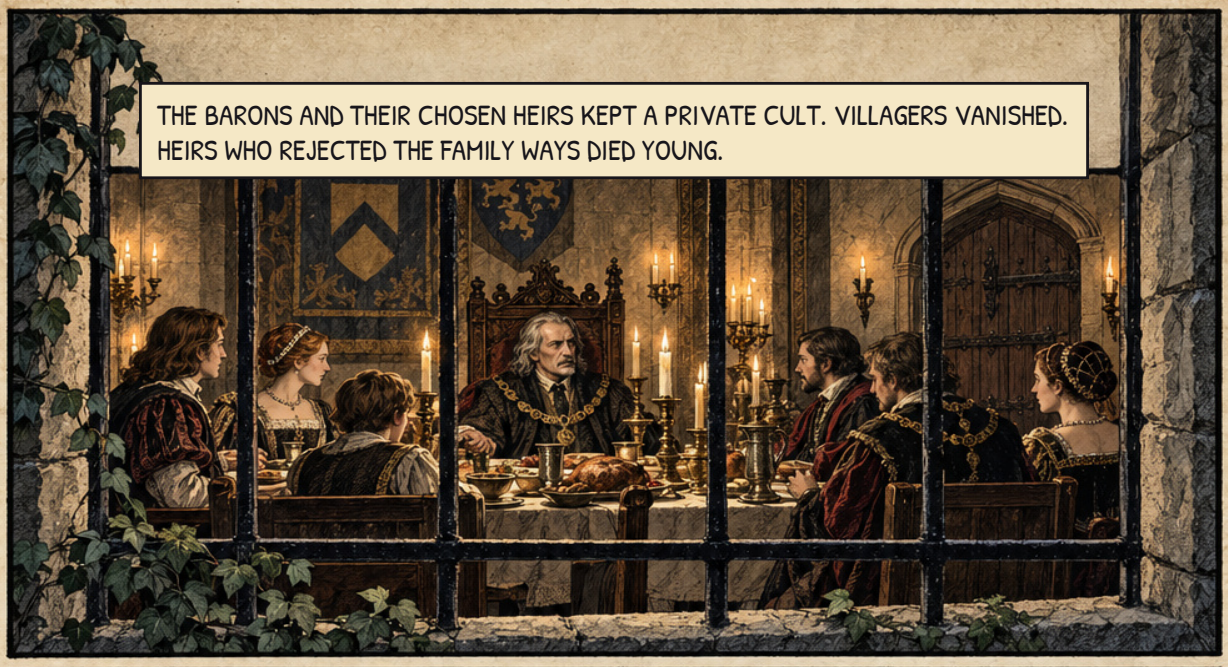

MY SON ALFRED FOUND THE PLACE WHILE SERVING IN ENGLAND. HIS FRIEND, CAPTAIN EDWARD NORRYS, SENT US ITS LEGENDS.


I BOUGHT THE PRIORY IN 1918. THEN ALFRED CAME HOME DISABLED. FOR TWO YEARS, CARING FOR HIM WAS MY WHOLE LIFE.


AFTER HIS DEATH I HAD NO PURPOSE LEFT. I TURNED TO THE HOUSE HE HAD FOUND FOR ME.

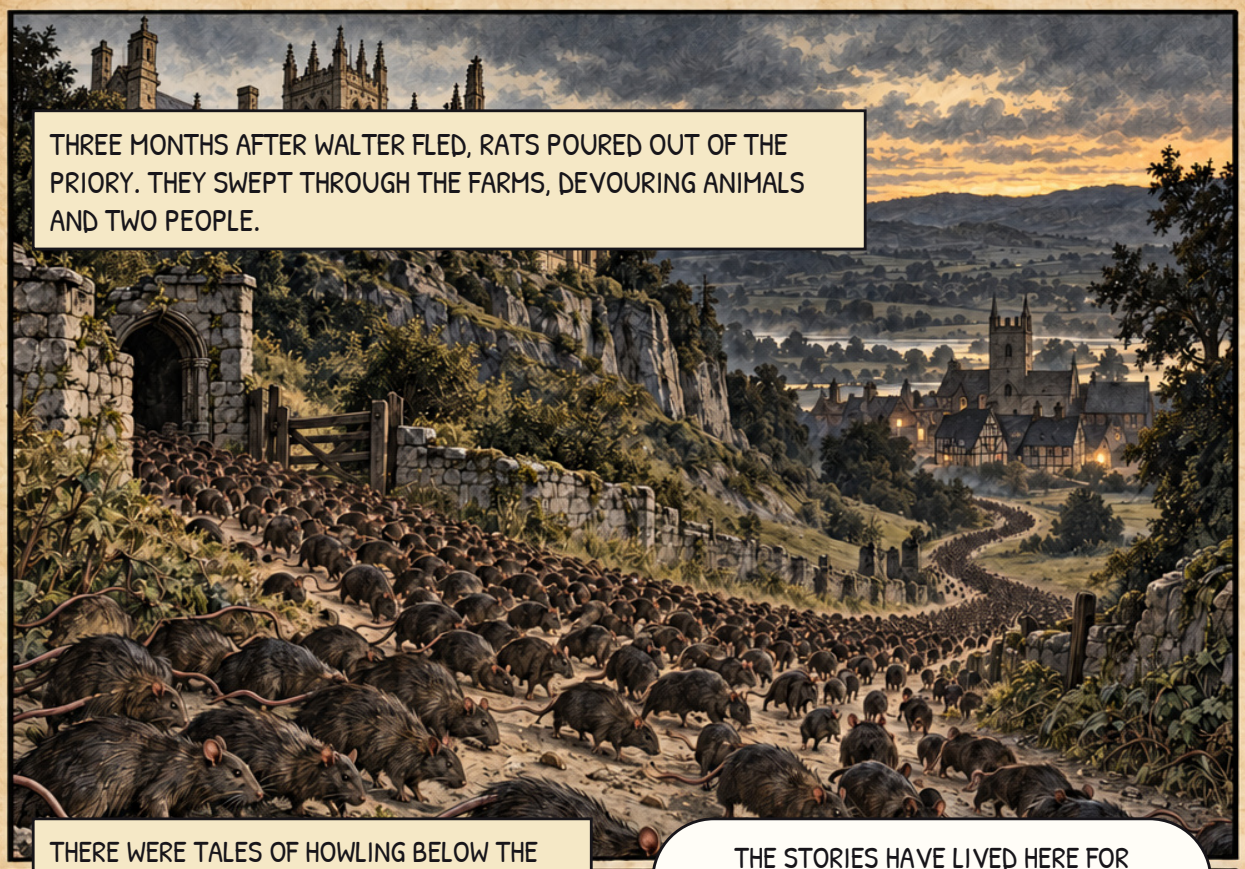

MY UNCLE WAS GLAD TO SELL. THE WALLS ARE SOUND ENOUGH. ALFRED WAS FASCINATED BY THEM.
LOCAL MEN WOULD NOT WORK THERE. EVEN OUTSIDERS DESERTED WHEN THEY HEARD THE TALES.
THEN WE SHALL FIND OTHERS. I MEAN TO SHOW THEM THAT A DE LA POER NEED NOT BE A FIEND.


THE OLDEST STONES BELONGED TO A TEMPLE OLDER THAN ROME.
THE ROMANS BROUGHT THE WORSHIP OF CYBELE. THE OLD RITES, PEOPLE SAID, SURVIVED EVERY CHANGE OF FAITH.
SAXON BUILDERS RAISED A PRIORY ABOVE THEM. IN 1261, HENRY THE THIRD GAVE THE PLACE TO GILBERT DE LA POER.


THE BARONS AND THEIR CHOSEN HEIRS KEPT A PRIVATE CULT. VILLAGERS VANISHED. HEIRS WHO REJECTED THE FAMILY WAYS DIED YOUNG.

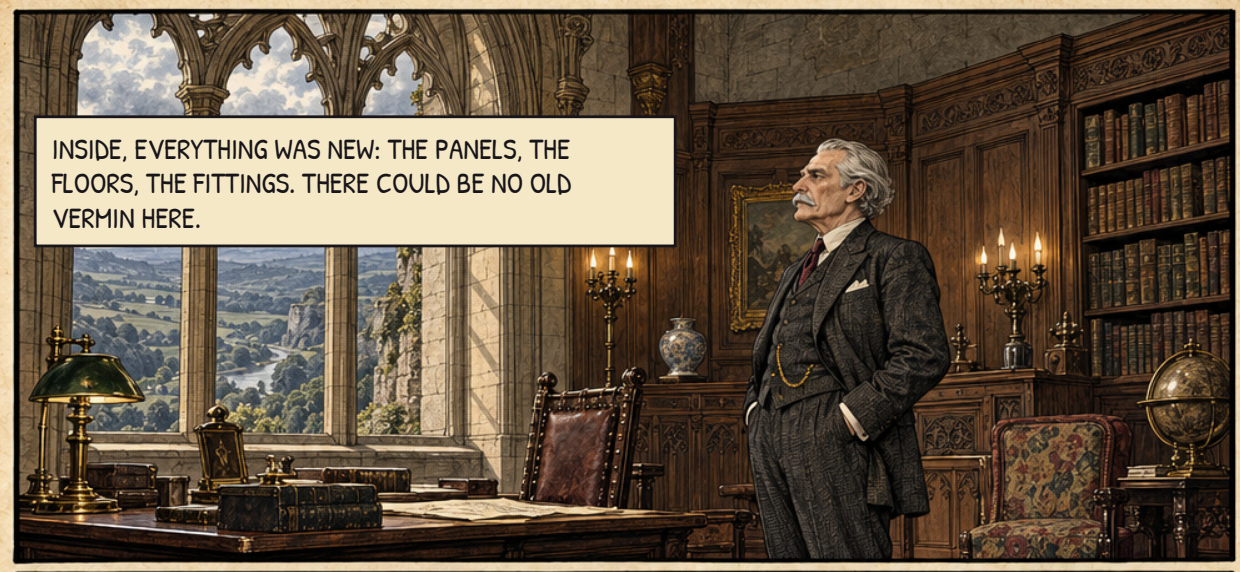

BALLADS MADE MONSTERS OF LADY MARGARET AND LADY MARY. I DISMISSED THEM AS SUPERSTITION.


BUT WALTER, THE ANCESTOR WHO FLED TO VIRGINIA, HAD DISCOVERED SOMETHING MORE THAN A STORY.

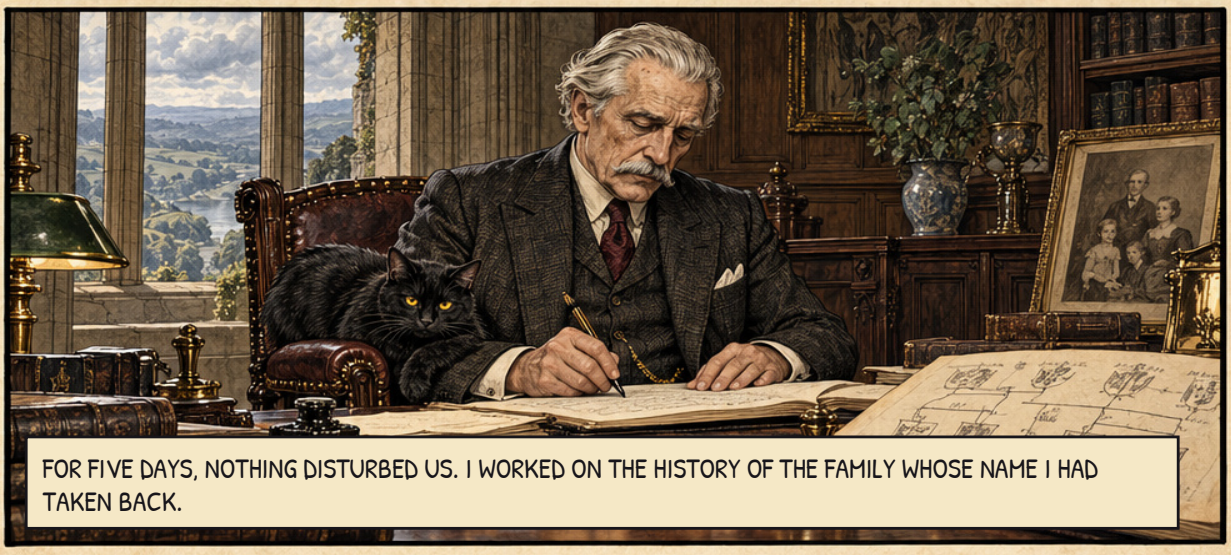

THREE MONTHS AFTER WALTER FLED, RATS POURED OUT OF THE PRIORY. THEY SWEPT THROUGH THE FARMS, DEVOURING ANIMALS AND TWO PEOPLE.

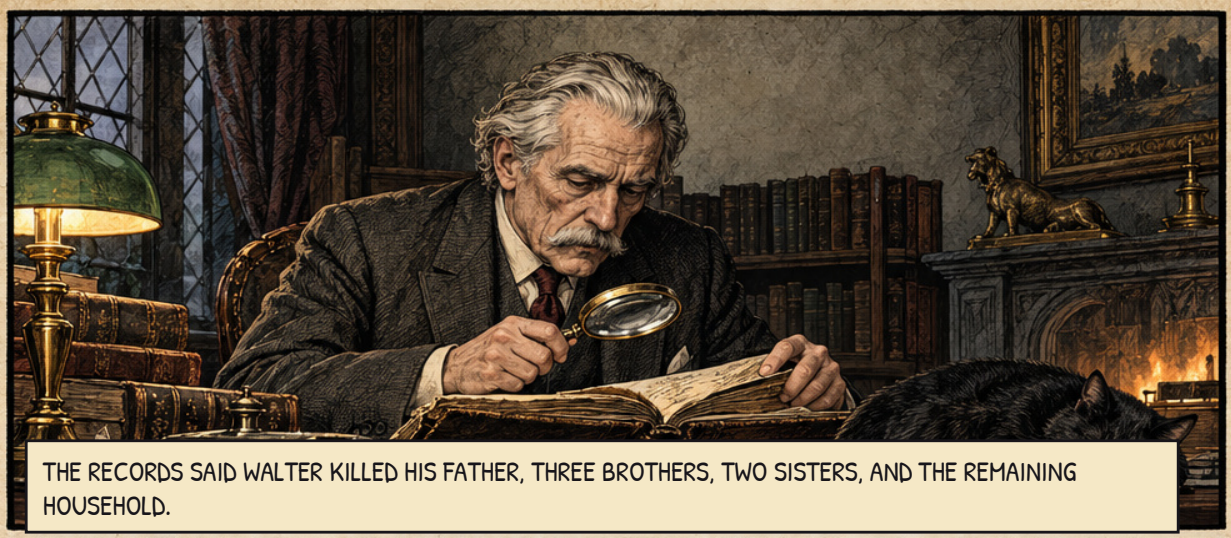

THERE WERE TALES OF HOWLING BELOW THE CLIFF, AND GARDENS FAR TOO LARGE FOR THE HOUSEHOLD.


THE STORIES HAVE LIVED HERE FOR CENTURIES. NO ONE HAS FORGOTTEN THE RATS.


INSIDE, EVERYTHING WAS NEW: THE PANELS, THE FLOORS, THE FITTINGS. THERE COULD BE NO OLD VERMIN HERE.


I BROUGHT SEVEN SERVANTS AND NINE CATS. MY OLDEST BLACK CAT HAD COME WITH ME FROM MASSACHUSETTS.


FOR FIVE DAYS, NOTHING DISTURBED US. I WORKED ON THE HISTORY OF THE FAMILY WHOSE NAME I HAD TAKEN BACK.



THE RECORDS SAID WALTER KILLED HIS FATHER, THREE BROTHERS, TWO SISTERS, AND THE REMAINING HOUSEHOLD.



TWO WEEKS BEFORE, A DISCOVERY HAD CHANGED HIM. FOUR SERVANTS HELPED HIM, THEN DISAPPEARED.



THE VILLAGE LET HIM GO. THEY BELIEVED HE HAD ENDED A CURSE. IN VIRGINIA, HE LIVED AS A GENTLE, HONOURABLE MAN.


ON JULY 22, MY OLDEST CAT BECAME RESTLESS. HE WANDERED FROM WALL TO WALL, SNIFFING THE ANCIENT STONE.
ALL THE CATS ARE DOING IT, SIR. COULD THERE BE MICE BEHIND THE PANELS?
SOME SMELL IN THE OLD MASONRY, PERHAPS. THERE HAVE BEEN NO RATS HERE FOR THREE HUNDRED YEARS.


THAT NIGHT THE CAT WOKE ME. FROM BEHIND THE TAPESTRY CAME A THIN, UNMISTAKABLE SCURRYING.

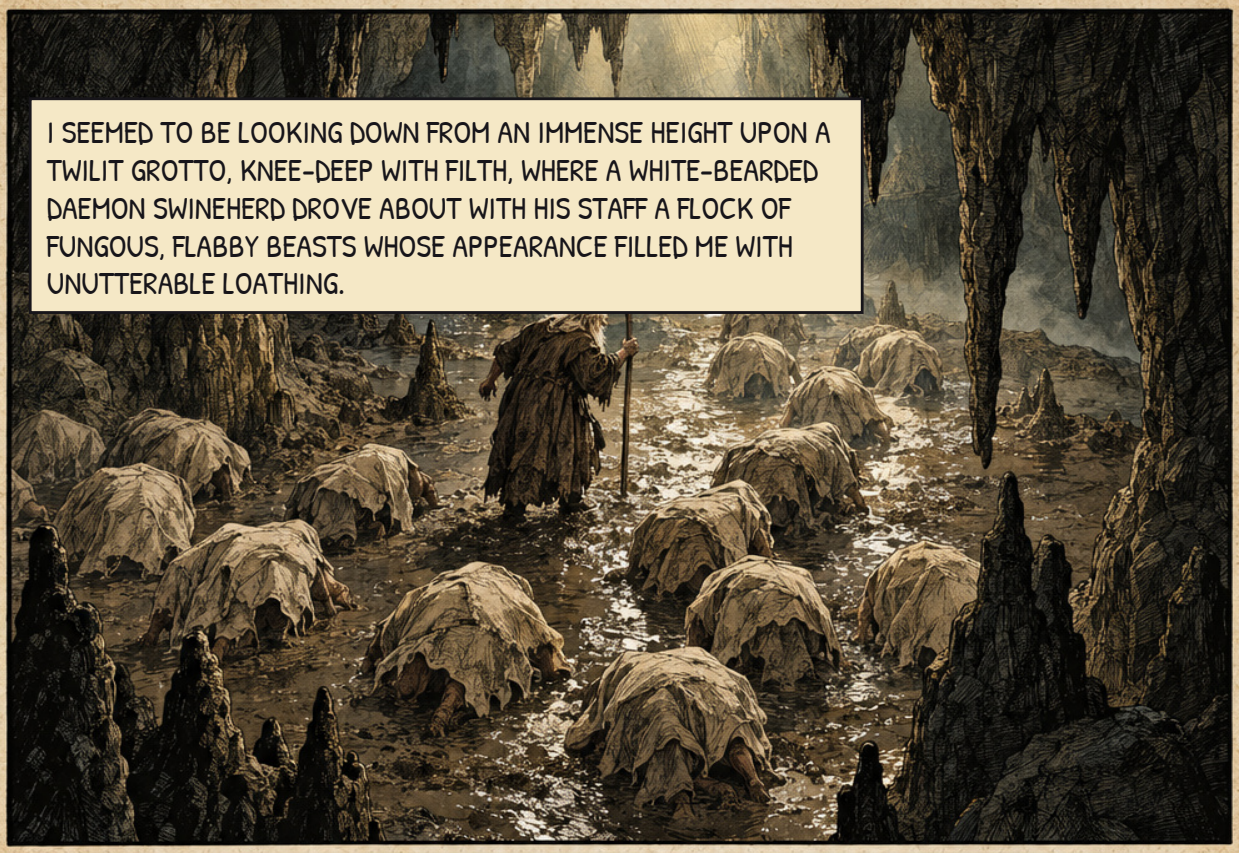

HE TORE THE HANGING DOWN.


THERE WAS ONLY STONE. HE SEARCHED EVERY CRACK, THEN RETURNED TO MY FEET. I DID NOT SLEEP AGAIN.


I HEARD MY CAT HOWL. HE RAN DOWNSTAIRS. BUT I HEARD NO RATS, SIR.


IT IS STRANGE. TRY THESE TRAPS. WE CAN AT LEAST FIND OUT WHETHER ANYTHING IS THERE.


WE SET TRAPS THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE. I WENT TO BED EARLY, EXHAUSTED.


I SEEMED TO BE LOOKING DOWN FROM AN IMMENSE HEIGHT UPON A TWILIT GROTTO, KNEE-DEEP WITH FILTH, WHERE A WHITE-BEARDED DAEMON SWINEHERD DROVE ABOUT WITH HIS STAFF A FLOCK OF FUNGOUS, FLABBY BEASTS WHOSE APPEARANCE FILLED ME WITH UNUTTERABLE LOATHING.


THEN, AS THE SWINEHERD PAUSED AND NODDED OVER HIS TASK, A MIGHTY SWARM OF RATS RAINED DOWN ON THE STINKING ABYSS AND FELL TO DEVOURING BEASTS AND MAN ALIKE.


I WOKE TO A SOUND FILLING EVERY WALL.


WHEN I SWITCHED ON THE LIGHT, IT STOPPED.

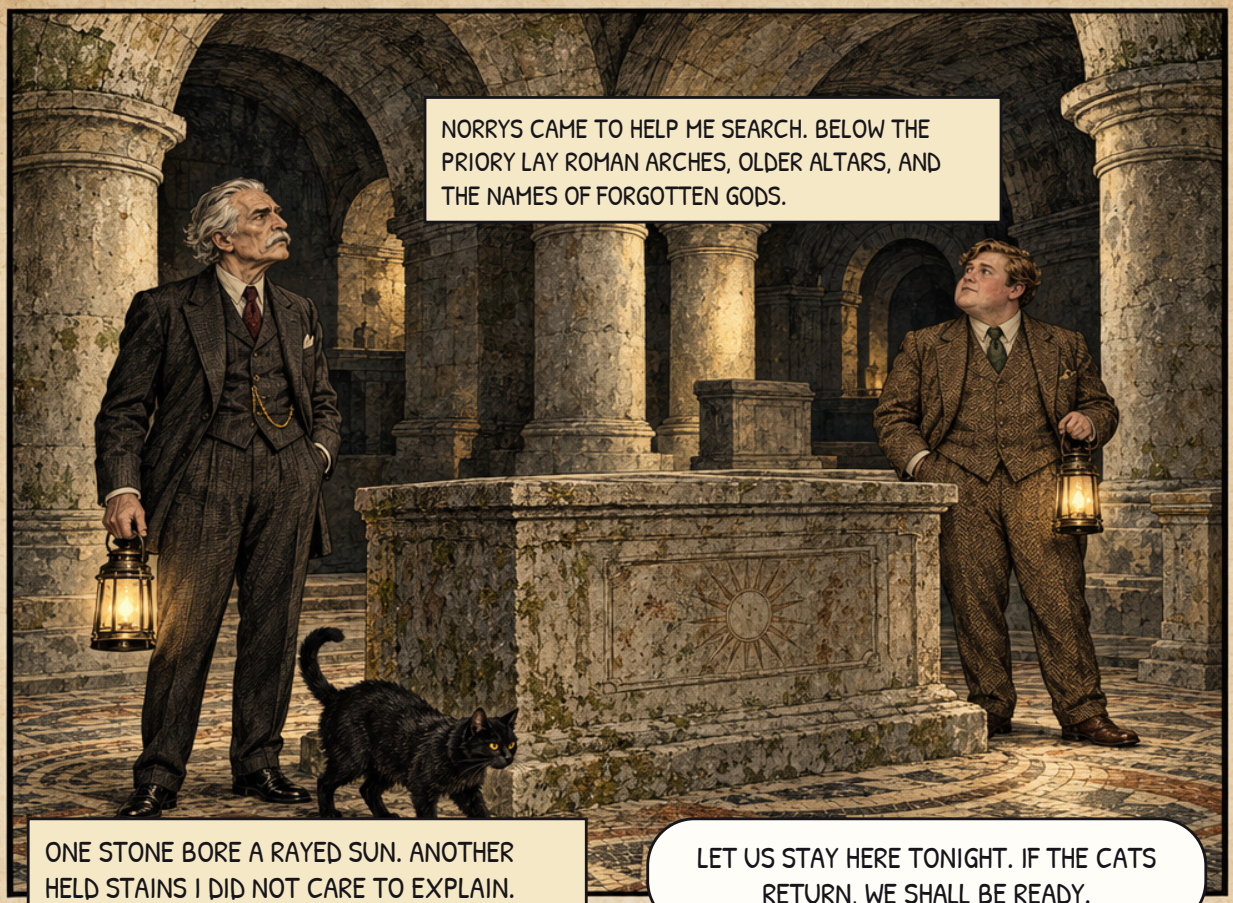

AGAIN, NOTHING BEHIND THE ARRAS.


EVERY OPENING IN THE TRAP HAD SPRUNG. IT WAS EMPTY.


THE SOUND BEGAN AGAIN IN MY STUDY. IT SEEMED TO MOVE IN ONE DIRECTION: DOWN.


YOU HEAR THEM? IN THE PANELS—THOUSANDS OF THEM!


THE SERVANTS HEARD ONLY THE CATS. EVERY CAT IN THE HOUSE HAD RUSHED TO THE SUB-CELLAR DOOR. EVERY TRAP WAS EMPTY.

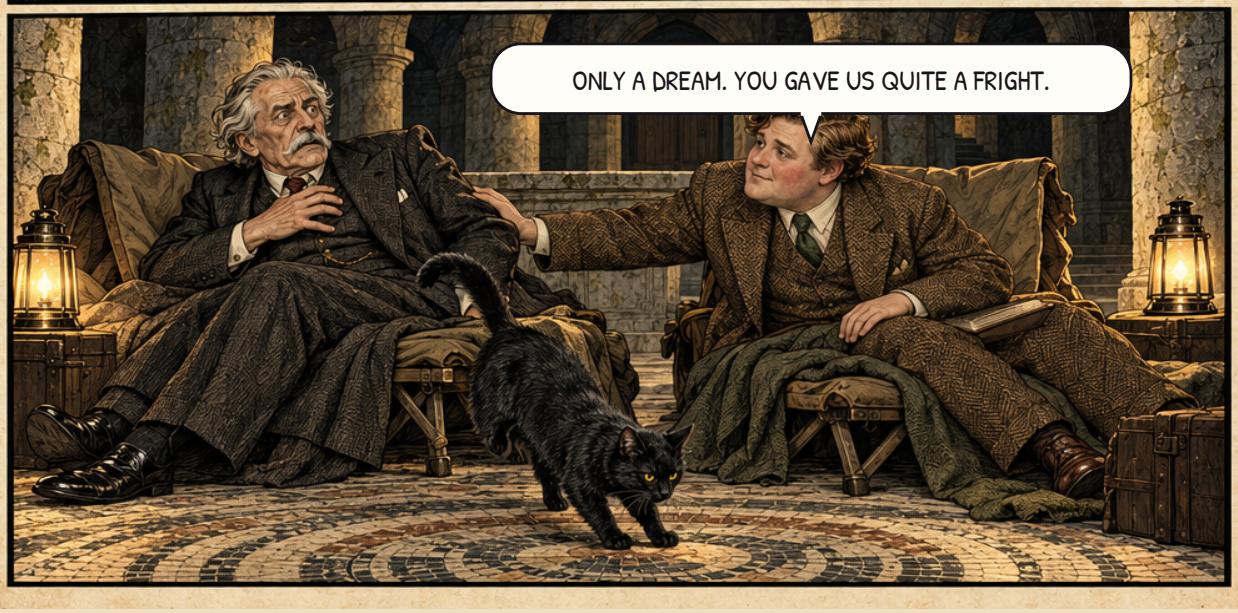

NORRYS CAME TO HELP ME SEARCH. BELOW THE PRIORY LAY ROMAN ARCHES, OLDER ALTARS, AND THE NAMES OF FORGOTTEN GODS.


ONE STONE BORE A RAYED SUN. ANOTHER HELD STAINS I DID NOT CARE TO EXPLAIN.


LET US STAY HERE TONIGHT. IF THE CATS RETURN, WE SHALL BE READY.


WE SHUT THE DOOR AND KEPT THE LANTERNS BURNING. THE CAT LAY ACROSS MY FEET.


THEN I DID OBSERVE THE FLABBY FEATURES OF ONE OF THEM...


ONLY A DREAM. YOU GAVE US QUITE A FRIGHT.


LISTEN TO THE CATS OUTSIDE. SOMETHING HAS STIRRED THEM AGAIN.
NOT THE CATS. THE RATS! CAN YOU NOT HEAR THEM IN THE STONE?
HE COULD NOT. I HEARD THE SCURRYING SINK BENEATH US, LOWER THAN THE DEEPEST FOUNDATIONS.


THE CAT SCRATCHED AT THE CENTRAL ALTAR. HE LOOKED AT ME AS IF ASKING ME TO OPEN IT.


NORRYS SCRAPED THE LICHENS AWAY.


LOOK AT THE FLAME. THERE IS AIR COMING FROM UNDERNEATH.


WE COULD NOT MOVE IT. BUT THERE WAS A SPACE BELOW THE ROMAN VAULT THAT NO ANTIQUARIAN HAD SUSPECTED.


WE COULD LEAVE THE PLACE. OR BRING MEN WHO KNOW HOW TO OPEN IT.

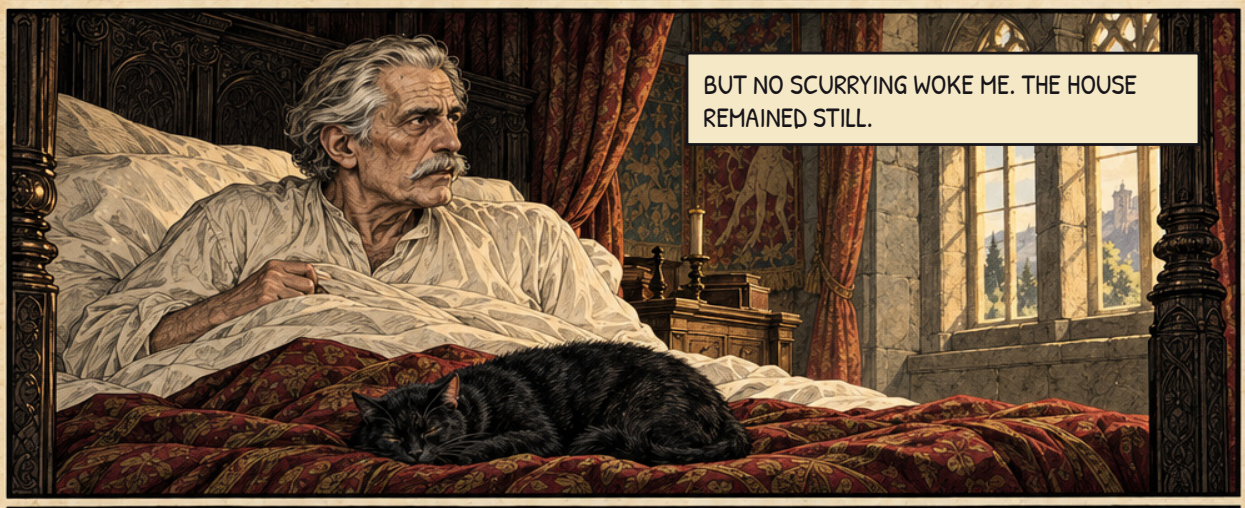

CURIOSITY WON. WE WENT TO LONDON, AND TOLD FIVE SPECIALISTS WHAT WE HAD FOUND.


A DRAUGHT BENEATH AN ALTAR IS WORTH INVESTIGATING. WE SHALL BRING PROPER LIGHTS AND TOOLS.


WE RETURNED ON AUGUST 7: NORRYS, MYSELF, AND FIVE MEN OF SCIENCE.


NOTHING UNUSUAL, SIR. THE CATS HAVE BEEN QUIET. NOT ONE TRAP HAS SPRUNG.


THERE WAS A VISION OF A ROMAN FEAST LIKE THAT OF TRIMALCHIO, WITH A HORROR IN A COVERED PLATTER.


BUT NO SCURRYING WOKE ME. THE HOUSE REMAINED STILL.


PERHAPS THE DISTURBANCE HAS SERVED ITS PURPOSE. PERHAPS YOU HAVE BEEN SHOWN WHAT IT WISHED YOU TO SEE.



AT ELEVEN, ALL SEVEN OF US WENT DOWN. WE BOLTED THE DOOR BEHIND US. THE CAT CAME TOO.



...WITHIN AN HOUR SIR WILLIAM BRINTON HAD CAUSED IT TO TILT BACKWARD, BALANCED BY SOME UNKNOWN SPECIES OF COUNTERWEIGHT.



BENEATH IT LAY STEPS, WORN ALMOST SMOOTH—AND A TANGLE OF GNAWED BONES.


WHATEVER THESE PEOPLE ENDURED, THEY WERE HUMAN.


THE MARKS RUN UPWARD. THIS PASSAGE WAS CUT FROM BELOW.

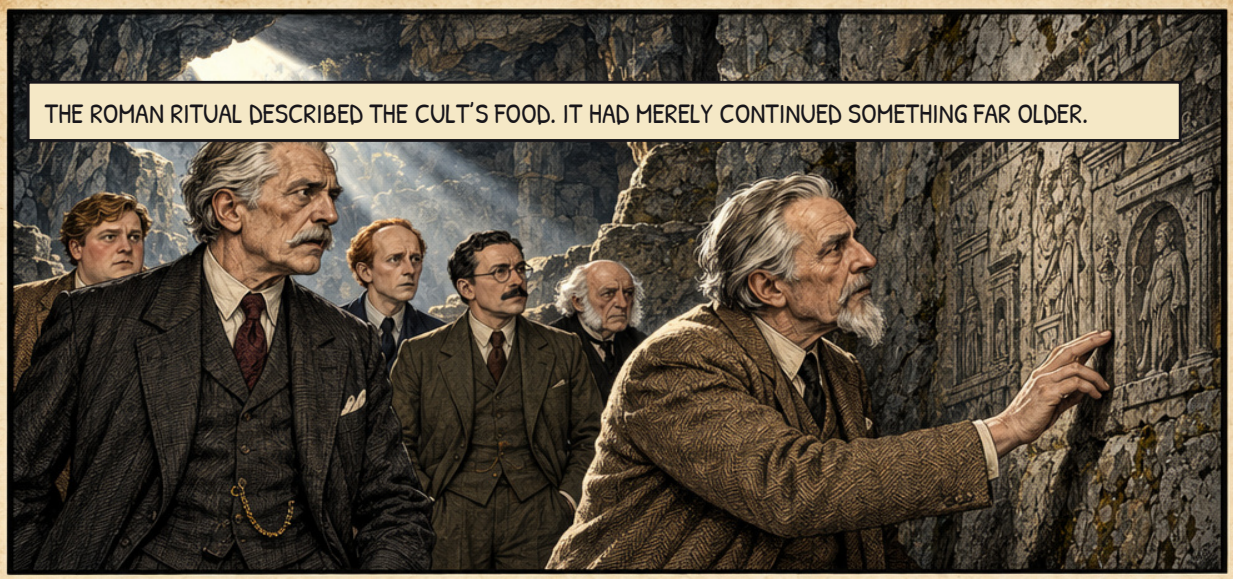

AHEAD WAS DAYLIGHT, FILTERED THROUGH UNSEEN CRACKS IN THE CLIFF.
THEN THE PASSAGE ENDED.


A WORLD LAY BENEATH THE CLIFF. TEMPLES, BURIAL MOUNDS, DWELLINGS FROM AGE AFTER AGE.
AND BETWEEN THEM, LIKE A PALE SEA, THE BONES OF THOSE WHO HAD LIVED HERE.


ALL HUMAN. SOME HAD BEEN FORCED INTO LIVES ON ALL FOURS, GENERATION AFTER GENERATION.

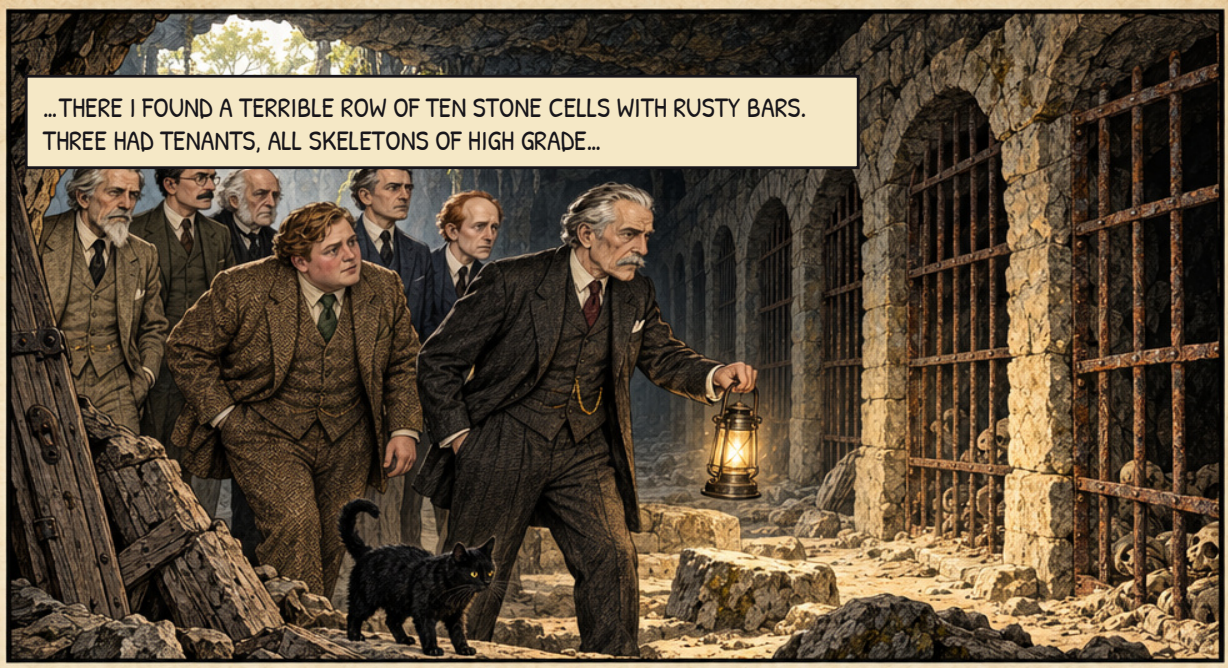

THEY HAD BEEN KEPT IN PENS. GREAT HERDS, REPLENISHED FROM ABOVE.


I KNEW NOW WHY MY ANCESTORS HAD HAD SUCH EXCESSIVE GARDENS—WOULD TO HEAVEN I COULD FORGET! THE PURPOSE OF THE HERDS I DID NOT HAVE TO ASK.

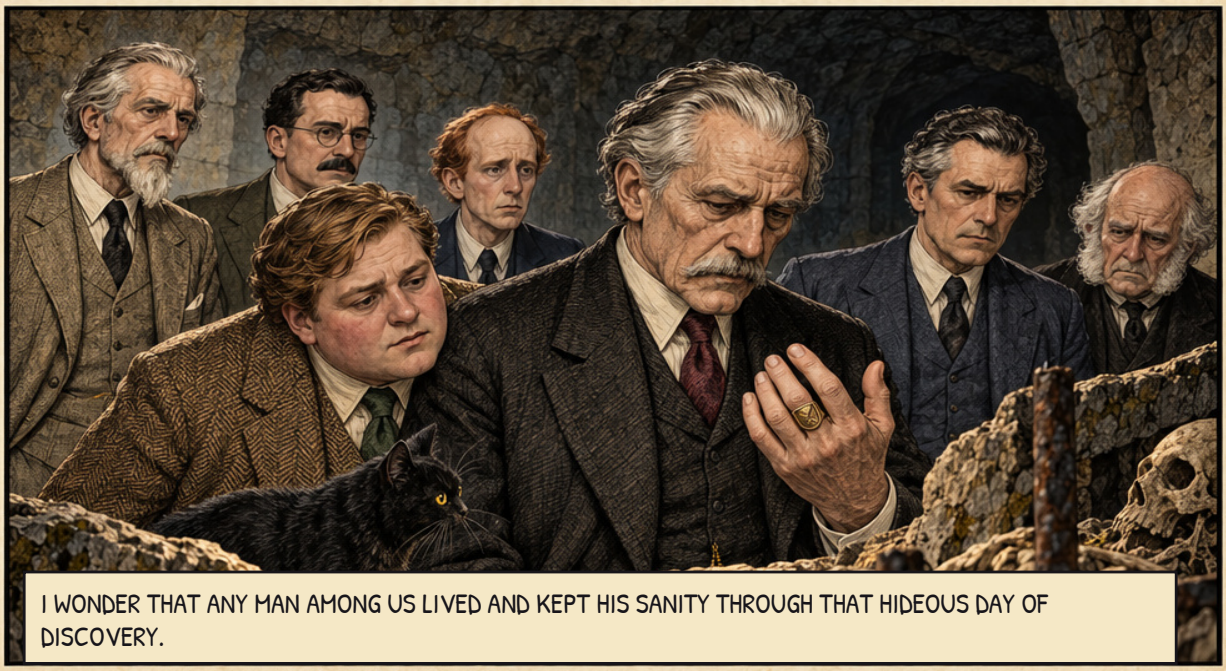

THE ROMAN RITUAL DESCRIBED THE CULT'S FOOD. IT HAD MERELY CONTINUED SOMETHING FAR OLDER.

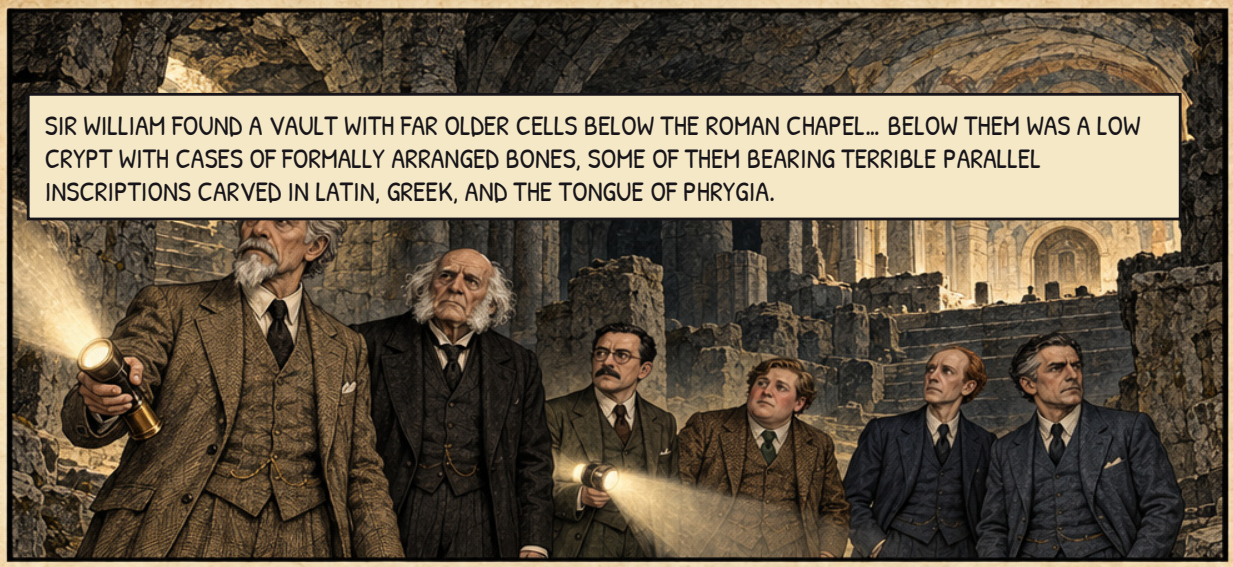

IT WAS A BUTCHER SHOP AND KITCHEN—HE HAD EXPECTED THAT—BUT IT WAS TOO MUCH TO SEE FAMILIAR ENGLISH IMPLEMENTS IN SUCH A PLACE, AND TO READ FAMILIAR ENGLISH GRAFFITI THERE, SOME AS RECENT AS 1610.


NO. I WILL NOT GO INSIDE.

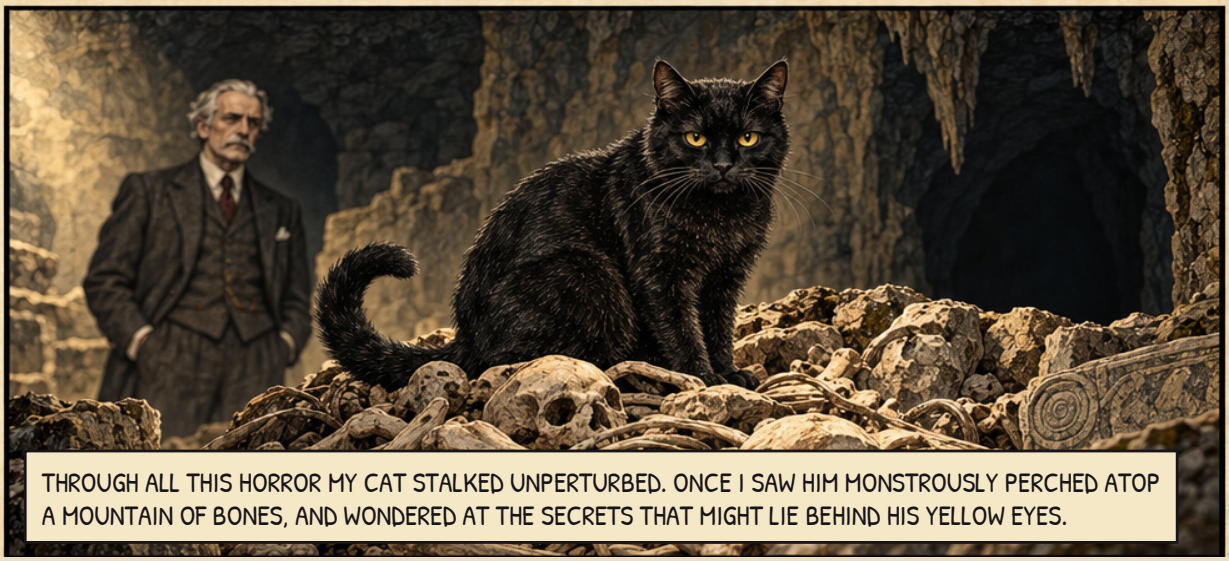

...THERE I FOUND A TERRIBLE ROW OF TEN STONE CELLS WITH RUSTY BARS. THREE HAD TENANTS, ALL SKELETONS OF HIGH GRADE...


...ON THE BONY FOREFINGER OF ONE I FOUND A SEAL RING WITH MY OWN COAT-OF-ARMS.


I WONDER THAT ANY MAN AMONG US LIVED AND KEPT HIS SANITY THROUGH THAT HIDEOUS DAY OF DISCOVERY.


SIR WILLIAM FOUND A VAULT WITH FAR OLDER CELLS BELOW THE ROMAN CHAPEL... BELOW THEM WAS A LOW CRYPT WITH CASES OF FORMALLY ARRANGED BONES, SOME OF THEM BEARING TERRIBLE PARALLEL INSCRIPTIONS CARVED IN LATIN, GREEK, AND THE TONGUE OF PHRYGIA.


EVEN THE PREHISTORIC GRAVES BORE SIGNS OF THE SAME PURPOSE.


THROUGH ALL THIS HORROR MY CAT STALKED UNPERTURBED. ONCE I SAW HIM MONSTROUSLY PERCHED ATOP A MOUNTAIN OF BONES, AND WONDERED AT THE SECRETS THAT MIGHT LIE BEHIND HIS YELLOW EYES.


BEYOND THE DAYLIGHT STRETCHED PITS NO BEAM COULD MEASURE. HERE THE REFUSE OF CENTURIES HAD FED THE RATS.
WALTER STOPPED THE SUPPLY. HUNGER DROVE THE RATS INTO THE PENS, THEN UPWARD INTO THE WORLD.


ONCE MY FOOT SLIPPED NEAR A HORRIBLY YAWNING BRINK, AND I HAD A MOMENT OF ECSTATIC FEAR... I COULD NOT SEE ANY OF THE PARTY BUT THE PLUMP CAPT. NORRYS.

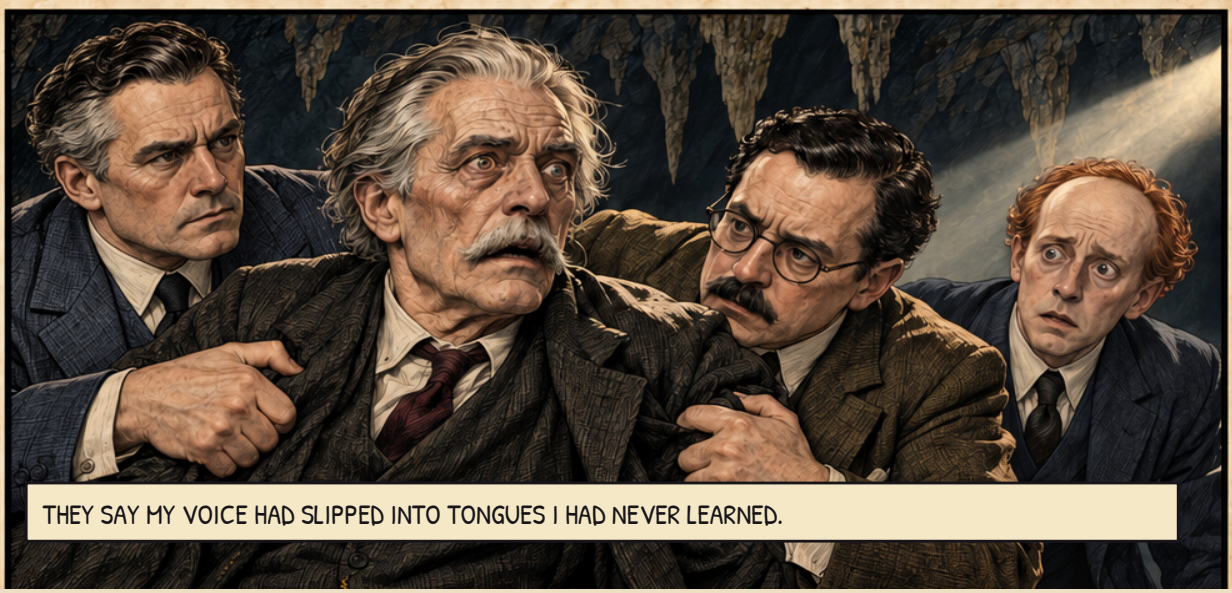

THEN THERE CAME A SOUND FROM THAT INKY, BOUNDLESS, FARTHER DISTANCE THAT I THOUGHT I KNEW...

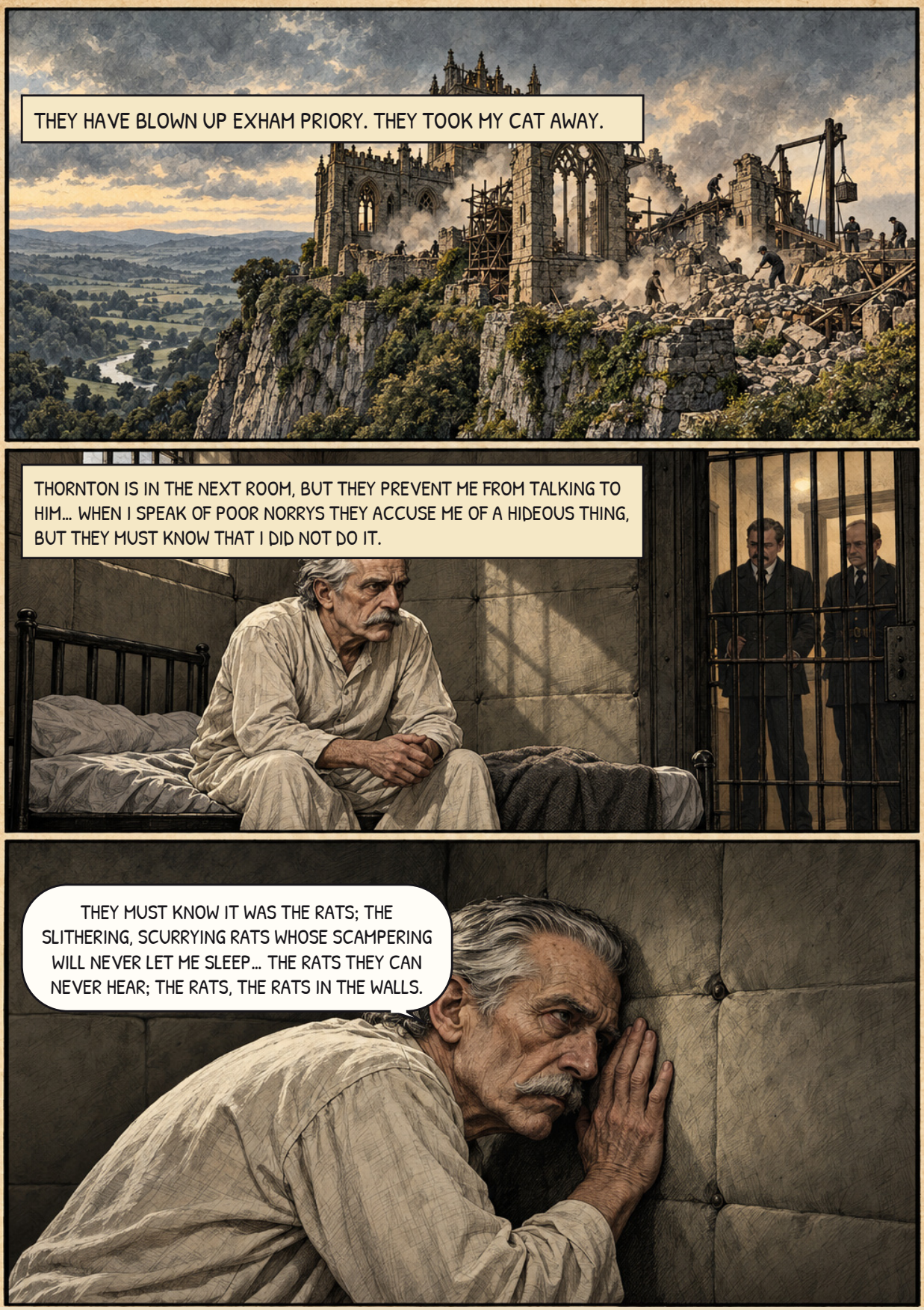

...I SAW MY OLD BLACK CAT DART PAST ME LIKE A WINGED EGYPTIAN GOD, STRAIGHT INTO THE ILLIMITABLE GULF OF THE UNKNOWN.


MY SEARCHLIGHT EXPIRED, BUT STILL I RAN... SOMETHING BUMPED INTO ME—SOMETHING SOFT AND PLUMP.
THE WAR ATE MY BOY, DAMN THEM ALL... NO, NO, I TELL YOU, I AM NOT THAT DAEMON SWINEHERD IN THE TWILIT GROTTO! IT WAS NOT EDWARD NORRYS' FAT FACE ON THAT FLABBY, FUNGOUS THING!
MAGNA MATER! MAGNA MATER!... ATYS... UNGL... UNGL... RRRLH... CHCHCH...


...THEY FOUND ME IN THE BLACKNESS AFTER THREE HOURS; FOUND ME CROUCHING IN THE BLACKNESS OVER THE PLUMP, HALF-EATEN BODY OF CAPT. NORRYS, WITH MY OWN CAT LEAPING AND TEARING AT MY THROAT.


THEY SAY I HAD PARTLY EATEN HIM.


THEY SAY MY VOICE HAD SLIPPED INTO TONGUES I HAD NEVER LEARNED.


THEY HAVE BLOWN UP EXHAM PRIORY. THEY TOOK MY CAT AWAY.
THORNTON IS IN THE NEXT ROOM, BUT THEY PREVENT ME FROM TALKING TO HIM... WHEN I SPEAK OF POOR NORRYS THEY ACCUSE ME OF A HIDEOUS THING, BUT THEY MUST KNOW THAT I DID NOT DO IT.
THEY MUST KNOW IT WAS THE RATS; THE SLITHERING, SCURRYING RATS WHOSE SCAMPERING WILL NEVER LET ME SLEEP... THE RATS THEY CAN NEVER HEAR; THE RATS, THE RATS IN THE WALLS.